FAITH'S IMPLAUSIBLE PROMISE

July 27, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"Ask, and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you." --Luke 11:9 (RSV)

Scripture
Luke 11:1-13

Alice Walker wrote her best selling novel, The Color Purple, as a collection of letters from Celie, a black woman in the South, first to God, then to her sister. The letters chronicle the story of her remarkable life: - from suffering, oppression and abuse, to self-discovery, liberation and salvation. There is a lot of religion in The Color Purple and there is a lot of provocative theology as well, sometimes distinct from and in tension with the religion. One of the most remarkable letters is the first one Celie writes to her sister...

> "Dear Nettie,
>
> I don't write to God no more. I write to you.
>
> What happen to God? ast Shug.
>
> Who that? I say...the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other men's I know. Trifling, forgitful, and lowdown.
>
> She say, Miss Celie, you better hush. God might hear you.
>
> Let 'im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you...
>
> All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did, I say. But deep in my heart I care about God. What he going to think. And come to find out, he don't think. Just sit up there glorying in being deef, I recon. But it ain't easy, trying to do without God. Even if you know he ain't there, trying to do without him is a strain." [The Color Purple, p. 175-6, Washington Square Press]

At that point Alice Walker is telling us something important about ourselves. "It ain't easy, trying to do without God"...

Someone is always surveying church people, it seems, and discovering our best-kept secret, namely that there isn't much praying going on, outside of corporate worship and meal-time when there is company. The surveys discover that most people think praying is a good idea. They just don't much do it.

There are - I think - several reasons. Donald Coggan, former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote: "...the universe is so huge and mysterious: life, suffering and death are so far beyond our comprehension. What is the point of our feeble little attempts at prayer, the broadcasts of tiny individuals in a great echoing vastness? Most of us either relapse into formality or give it up altogether." [Great Words of the Christian Faith, p.109-110]

That's one reason - the vastness of the universe and the relative insignificance of the individual. The second reason is more serious and more difficult. It has to do with the very existence of God and the relationship of God to the creation. That's as fundamental a theological problems as there is: as Alice Walker playfully expressed it - "God just sitting up there, glorying in being deef."

We want to believe the bumper sticker that confidently announces "Prayer changes things." Yet we know that if we even begin to think about that analytically we encounter a series of very serious theological and personal difficulties. If prayer works, why doesn't God answer me? If prayer changes things why in the world doesn't God heal the people I pray for, or do something about the hungry and homeless and refugees who are the subjects of incessant praying. Does anyone seriously believe that God has to be persuaded to heal a sick child?... that God's healing power is inert in its natural state and may be stimulated if we can simply accumulate enough prayers, a kind of critical mass of piety? That's what it sounds like. Do we seriously propose that the abandoned minority child at Cook County Hospital dying of leukemia whose name no one even knows and for whom no one is praying receives less divine love than the privileged child for whom hundreds of friends of the family are praying? In his book, Daring Prayer, David Willis writes about crises pray-ers: "They put their last dime into this slot when there is nowhere else to turn, only to find out that when they needed God's help the most, they got a busy signal. Or worse yet, they got a pre-taped answering service which referred them to another time and another place for the help which they needed then and there..." [p. 131]

Looming behind our rationally scientific and theologically troublesome questions about prayer is twenty centuries of accumulated Christian custom and tradition and behind it, the testimony of the Bible. "...pray without ceasing," or as Jesus said once "ask - seek - knock...it will be given to you - you will find - it will be opened to you" - Faith's Implausible Promise.

His disciples had asked him to teach them how to pray. He gave them a model, what we know as the Lord's Prayer, and then he told them a peculiar short story. In order to understand this brilliant little parable, to get the point, we must bring to it two things which are not normally among our religious resources - some knowledge of the Oriental/Arabic culture of Jesus' day, and a sense of humor.

Ordinarily we don't think about Jesus telling jokes. Ordinarily we are pretty serious, grim even, about religious matters. This story, however, is first of all funny. It is about a man asleep on his reed mat, beside his wife and children. It's the middle of the night. Suddenly a loud knock on the door penetrates the silence. The children stir, his wife

opens one eye and pokes him in the back. He can't get to the door without stepping on a few children so, in a stage whisper he calls out -

"Who is it? What do you want?..."

"It's me - Joe - next door! - I need three loaves of bread..."

"You what?"

"I need three loaves of bread. We just got company..."

"You've got to be kidding. It's midnight. Come back in the morning."

The man settles back down on his mat, turns over, pulls up the cover. Again, the knock shatters the stillness.

"Come on - just three loaves...help me out."

Now the children are awake and his wife is saying things like,

"For crying out loud...will you just go get him the bread."

And so he gets up and gets his persistent neighbor what he wants. I think Jesus told that story with a twinkle in his eye and I think there were a lot of chuckles from the people who heard it.

The second thing we must bring is some understanding of Arabic custom. Kenneth Bailey is a New Testament scholar who has lived and worked in the villages of Palestine and he is very helpful in pointing out that Oriental/Arabic hospitality customs were legendary. This was a ridiculous situation, essentially. The man who had unexpected company had to be a gracious host. Custom demanded it. He had to offer even the stranger more than he could afford to offer and the guest had to eat. Secondarily, the guest was the responsibility of the community. All were involved in assuring that the guest was received graciously so that he would think well of all of them. That's a little difficult for us even to comprehend. Whatever sense of corporate responsibility we used to have is not only eroded but scorned, laughed at as soft, naive, do-goodish. We believe that the poor are not our responsibility. We arrest and put on trial church people who feel a corporate sense of responsibility to shelter and give sanctuary to political refugees from countries whose oppressive regimes we support with lots of money. But to understand this parable we have to know about a deep sense of corporate responsibility for the stranger - poor, refugee, sojourner. Jesus was saying, in essence, "can you imagine someone acting as boorishly as that sleeping man, coming up with those ridiculous excuses for not helping with the responsibility of communal hospitality?" Our answer would be - Yes. We can imagine that. That's how we act. Theirs was - "no, we can't imagine someone acting that selfishly, that unfaithfully."

God, Jesus was saying, can be counted on for at least that much graciousness, attentiveness. Fathers don't give their children a scorpion instead of an egg. Parents don't act like that. So God will give you what you need.

Please notice that Jesus did not say God will give you what you want. As a matter of fact both we - and those Palestinian peasants who heard this story - know that good parents don't give children everything they want. In fact, a case can be made that good parenting is a matter of resisting the very real temptation to give a child something he or she wants but doesn't need, or wants but really needs to learn to earn or win or accomplish alone.

Please notice as well that even though the momentum of this passage is pressing in the direction of "you will get what you want if you ask persistently enough," at the very last moment Jesus changes directions. "If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

What we want, that is to say, is not the issue. It is not cause and effect, stimulus and response, pray long enough and get the job, house, healing, or the parking place someone told me recently, with a straight face, God had provided on East Chestnut Street. The text is going in deeper and dealing with fundamental things: our true needs, for instance and the power of God to be for us - what you and I need most in this world. What God gives - is God.

Let's clear the air - even though it may make us uncomfortable. God doesn't grant favors, selectively, based on the ardor, frequency or accumulated weight of prayer. At least, I don't think he does. God isn't going to make it rain in Georgia because there are 2 million people praying for rain in Georgia, and keep the heat on in South Carolina because there are only 1 million praying for rain there. Now let me quickly and clearly qualify - by confessing that there is a lot about this world that we don't understand and that the basic premise of all theological discourse is modesty, i.e. if God is God, there is a freedom to be whatever God wills to be. Preachers and churches get in trouble when they presume to know too much about God. Let me confess the paradox that if I were in Georgia this morning I would be praying for rain, and when someone I love is sick I pray for their healing and that I pray for peace and justice and hungry people, but I can't believe that God causes the fellow in the Ford to pull out so I have a place, or leans over the shoulder of the mortgage officers so I get my loan.

I pray for healing, for justice and peace, for the safety of my traveling children and for rain in Georgia - because of Jesus Christ's promise... I pray because in Christ I am invited to share with God everything that is in my heart of hearts...my dearest loves, my passion, my pain, my fear, my aspirations...

You know, you never grow out of wanting sometimes to talk things over with your parents...

When we used to be able to do it - or when we still do it, actually or figuratively - the actual situation about which we are concerned, does not miraculously change... When you wanted a car, or wanted to be class president, or to make the team, or for the ear ache to go away...and you brought that personal agenda to your parent...your desire was not

miraculously fulfilled. But something terribly important did happen - with mystical power to change things in you and for you. Something very creative happened because of the relationship which is affirmed in the act itself of coming to your parent with whatever is in your heart.

So - I will bring it to God... "take it to the Lord in Prayer...," in the words of the old Gospel hymn...my love and passion and hope and aspiration and fear. I will pray for peace and justice...

But I still can't believe - that God causes the fellow in the Ford to pull out so I have a parking place.

What is prayer? What is faith's implausible promise about? What I am certain about is that things are different for me when someone cares enough to pray for me. What I am sure of is the strength - the empowering, to use the current vogue word - which is my experience when someone prays for me. What I am sure of is the profound meaning conveyed when someone tells me I am in his or her prayers and how much I can be sustained and inspired by that.

What I am sure of is that prayer is a real and wonderful vehicle for human love, and that when we pray for another person we become, somehow - mysteriously, a channel through which God's own love gets to that person. What I am certain of is that prayer changes people who pray: that if you pray, honestly for hungry people, you will find yourself in some way feeding hungry people and becoming God's answer to your own prayer. Someone said it this way: "Prayer does not change things. Prayer changes people who change things." [David Willis, op.cit., p. 120]

Archbishop Coggan wrote: "Really to pray is to stand at attention in the presence of the King...prepared to take orders from him." [op.cit., p. 110] I believe that too; that prayer is listening, being silent and empty and useless in God's presence (Nouwen): that prayer is not limited to formal, verbal structures.

"Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find: knock, and it will be opened to you."

I invite you to take that implausible promise of faith utterly seriously. Having shared all the reasons why the mechanistic concept of prayer is not adequate and often offensive, I invite you to regard prayer as the natural expression of the most radical idea in the world - the idea of a God who is personal.

That is the essential Christian idea. It is what Jesus taught. It is what the Christ event is about. It is the message of this parable. We share with all religion the notion of a powerful creator God. We hold in common with all a notion that God is just and righteous. The radical heart of the matter for us, is the idea that this God is personal: that God has a heart: that the Lord of the universe knows us, cares about us, loves us, shares our humanity. The most radical idea of all is that Almighty God is affected by what happens to me: that our God is not the unfeeling, unchanging, immutable deity of scholastic philosophy, but a parent, the Father of Jesus Christ, the mother and father of us all who loves us as

intensely and creatively as any parent ever loved a child.

What Jesus was addressing in this peculiar little story is the deepest human need of all, the need for love: the need that erupts in a desperate cry, "O God, help me!": the need we hear from within in spite of our rational religion, "Christ, it hurts: make it stop": "God, why did he have to die?" What Jesus promised was that then, when the situation is "knock-at-the-door-in-the-middle-of-the-night-urgent" God will be there: we will be loved and strengthened and cared for. "...how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" Jesus promised.

St. Augustine, centuries ago wrote "Thou hast made us restless until we find our rest in thee."

Alice Walker, a few years ago, wrote "...it ain't easy, trying to do without God."

Our Lord said

"Ask, and it will be given you.

Seek, and you will find

Knock, and it will be opened to you."

Amen.

Lord God, we acknowledge limits of our knowledge. We do not know all there is to know. And we confess, the inadequacy of our faith: nevertheless, we come in prayer, trusting your love, sure of your faithfulness to us, confident in your grace. We know you hear us. Lord teach us to pray: call out of us bold prayers: strong prayers, ambitious prayers. Give us courage to pray always what is in our hearts: for we do so in the name of him who was your promise to us, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.